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A UNITARIAN MINISTER'S VIEW OF THE TALMUDIC DOCTRINE OF GOD.

THE zeal of orthodox Christianity, as professed by so-called Christian nations, has shown itself, from time to time, even down to the present day, in fierce hatred and persecution of the Jews. False, not merely to the teaching of Jesus, but to the natural instincts of humanity, the Church has looked upon the scattered and defenceless people of Israel as its lawful prey, and has dealt with them as enemies of God and man. Many a page of European history is stained deep with the records of cruelty towards the Jews, and no Christian can reflect without shame on the deeds which have been committed in the name of Christianity. As a natural consequence of the attitude of Christian orthodoxy towards the Jewish people, their literature has been reviled and derided, scoffed at as foolish or condemned as impious and profane, a tissue of blasphemy mingled with indecency. Where there was no pretence of fairness or impartial study, it is not surprising that Christian opinion of Jewish literature should be hopelessly in error. The means for an adequate investigation of that literature were not at hand, for the knowledge of Rabbinical Hebrew was confined to a few, most of whom used it merely to produce garbled evidence against Jewish writers; while on the other hand, there was naturally no inducement for Jews to translate their works into more familiar languages, and present them to unsympathetic readers. Even at the present day, though much has been written to elucidate the Rabbinical literature, and aid in the study of it those who are not Jews, yet there still remains a good deal of prejudice which seems to many writers to demand an apology for dealing with that literature. Nothing can be more one-sided or partial than some of the published selections from the Talmud; those of Hershon, e.g., are written with a strong Christian bias, and the same is true, to a large extent, of Etheridge's *Introduction to Hebrew Literature*. There seems still to be wanting an unprejudiced courtesy towards the Rabbinical writings; and especially in regard to the Talmud there is needed a more serious attempt to judge it fairly, and without at every step

comparing its teachings with other doctrines that may be preferred. Whether the theology of the Talmud is adapted to the religious wants of the present day is a question which must be left to those who have inherited the Talmud; but, considering the patient and devoted labour which was expended through centuries in compiling it, there ought to be no question of its claim to careful and sympathetic study, with the sole aim of understanding what its authors intended, and without regard to later views on the same objects of thought.

The following pages are offered as a humble contribution towards a fairer appreciation of the Talmud, and in particular towards the understanding of one feature in it which has been singled out for especial attack, viz., its teaching about God. Charges of blasphemy and profanity have been freely brought against the Talmud for the strongly anthropomorphic character of many of its statements about the Almighty, and it will be time well spent to inquire if a more satisfactory explanation cannot be found than in mere abuse.

Explanations of a far higher order have been given and will be referred to below; but as these are contained in learned works not accessible to all, and moreover do not appear to the present writer entirely satisfactory, it may perhaps be permitted to him to venture into a field already trodden.

What, in the first place, are the facts to be explained, and wherein lies the riddle which must be solved? Briefly, the case stands thus, that in the Talmud two conceptions of God are found, to all appearance diametrically opposed to each other; one of them in which God is refined to an almost colourless abstraction, the other giving a humanised representation of God, which puts into the shade the extremest anthropomorphisms of the Old Testament. Of these two the latter is far the more prominent, as could hardly fail to be the case, seeing that the points of contact between humanity and the humanised God are far more numerous than those between humanity and God conceived as infinite and absolute. But both conceptions are present, and it becomes a question what is the relation between the two.

The facts of the case are well given by Weber (*Alt-Synagogale Theologie*, chap. xi., p. 144, *seqq.*). He illustrates the first conception of God (the characteristics of which he defines as "den abstracten Monotheismus, und den abstracten Transcendentismus") chiefly by the names or titles which are used to denote the Supreme Being. Thus, of very frequent occurrence is the title, *רַבּוֹנוֹ שֶׁל עָולָם* "Lord of the World"; and with this may be compared the phrase, *הַקְבִּיה מִתְנָאָה עַל*

כָּלַע וְעַל כָּל הָעוֹלָם (*Chag.* 13b), "The Holy One, blessed be he, is exalted over them all, and over all the world." Again, it is said (*B. Bathr.*, 25a), "שְׁכִינָה בְּכָל מִקּוּם" "The Divine Presence is in every place." It is significant that the name יְהֹוָה is not used, though various passages in the Talmud refer to its use on certain occasions, and others strongly forbid all mention of it. The obvious meaning of this reluctance to use what had been the personal name of the God of Israel is, that such a personal name was not in harmony with the idea of one Supreme God. Probably its occasional use was due to the desire to give additional solemnity to religious rites, by introducing the ancient sacred name, although the name had really lost its significance. (The name, under the form Jehovah, is still frequently used in Christian services, where, so far as we can see, its only recommendation is that it has a majestic sound.) In place of the ancient name, God was spoken of or addressed as אל, אֱלֹהִים, or המקוּם, the name, besides the more descriptive epithets mentioned above.

This conception of God as high exalted above the world, far removed from contact with it, is the natural development of the Old Testament doctrine, culminating in the writings of the Second Isaiah. The Prophet of the Exile teaches the highest and most abstract monotheism to be found in the Bible, and clearly points the way for the still further abstraction which characterises the Talmudic idea of God. Weber (*l.c.*, p. 147) maintains that this further abstraction was brought about by opposition to the trinitarian idea of God in Christianity, and no doubt this may have contributed to produce the result which appears in the Talmud. But apart from this there seems sufficient evidence in the Old Testament to account for the Talmudic idea.

The opposite conception of God, that which is anthropomorphic to the highest degree, also has its roots in the Old Testament. The wide gulf which seems to exist in the Talmud between the two conceptions of God may be discerned as a slight rift in the Old Testament, when the writings of Ezekiel are compared with those of the Second Isaiah. For Ezekiel is really the founder of the legal form of the Jewish religion, in spite of the fact that codes of laws existed before his time. Both he and the Second Isaiah attempted to interpret the religious significance of the Exile and its bearing upon the future career of Israel. And while the one founded upon it his grand doctrine of the sole sovereignty of God, the other developed from it the doctrine that laws and regulations were needed to take the place of the free prophetic spirit

which had been tried and found wanting. Though Ezekiel's scheme of legislation was never adopted (it was even proposed to exclude his book from the canon because it contradicted the Pentateuch¹), yet undoubtedly it led the way to the legislation of Ezra, and thence to the Oral Law, the Tradition of the Elders, and thus finally to the Talmud. The anthropomorphic conception of God is the direct outcome of the legal and traditional form which Judaism assumed in consequence of the teaching of Ezekiel and his successors in the same direction.

To illustrate this side of the Talmudic doctrine of God is easy, for material is as abundant as on the other side it was scanty. It is not needful to search very long in the Talmud before meeting with statements about God which are, to say the least, startling. Perhaps the best general illustration will be the famous story of Rabah bar Nahmani and his translation to heaven (B. Metz. 86a). After relating how this Rabbi fled from the pursuit of a king's officer, and took refuge in a marsh, where he sat down on the trunk of a palm-tree and began to read, the narrator goes on, "Now, there was a dispute in the assembly of heaven whether, if the bright spot comes before the white hair, the person is unclean, and if the white hair comes before the bright spot, he is clean. The Holy One, blessed be he, says he is clean; but all the assembly of heaven say he is unclean. Then they say, 'Who shall decide?' 'Rabah bar Nahmani shall decide' (for R. b. N. had said, 'I am alone [i.e., an unequalled authority] in regard to "plagues";' I am alone in regard to "tents" [i.e., cases of uncleanness caused by the presence of a corpse].') They sent the messenger after him. The angel of death could not manage to approach him, because his mouth never ceased reading, until a breeze blew and rustled among the reeds. He thought it was a troop of horse, and said, 'May I die rather than be delivered up to the government.' While he spoke he died. He said, 'Clean, clean.' There came a voice (*Bath-Qol*), and said, 'Happy art thou, Rabah bar Nahmani, because thy body is clean and thy soul is departed in purity.' A scroll fell down from heaven into Pumbaditha: 'Rabah bar Nahmani was required in the heavenly assembly.'" The story goes on to say how his colleagues mourned for him seven days at the express command of heaven. The genius of anthropomorphic description could hardly attempt a more daring flight than that contained in the above story. But, though that is perhaps the most

¹ Sabb. 13b.

extreme case, there are many others which fall not far short of it in humanising (or, as Weber says, "Judaizing") the conception of God. Thus we are told (*A. Zar.*, 3b), "Rab Jehudah says that Rab says, 'There are twelve hours in the day. During the first three the Holy One, blessed be he, sits and studies Torah ; during the second (three) he sits and judges the whole world, all of it ; when he sees that the whole of it is worthy of destruction, he rises from his throne of justice and sits upon his throne of mercy ; during the third (three) he sits and feeds the world from the horns of the unicorns (עֲמָתִים) to the eggs of the gnats ; during the fourth (three) he sits and plays with Leviathan, as it is written, "that Leviathan whom thou formedst to play with" (Ps. civ. 26)." Further, it is said that God wears a Tallith (*R. ha Sh.* 17b)—a fact which, says R. Jochanan, could not be believed unless it were written, but which he obtains by interpreting 'יעבּר הַ על פְנֵי וַיַּקְרָא (Exod. xxxiv. 6) to mean "The Lord passed (the Tallith) over his face and read." It is only a slight step further that God should pray, and that the words of his prayer, or rather meditation, should be recorded (*Berach.* 7a).

Besides such anthropomorphisms as those contained in the above stories, there are many others of a more generally human and less specifically Jewish character. God is said to laugh, to weep, to roar, to be angry. He can even hate (*Nid.* 16b). And on the strength of a forced interpretation of texts, it is said that he plaited the hair of Eve (*Ber.* 61a), and by the help of the ministering angels shaved Sennacherib (*Sanh.* 95b). To these, other examples might be added, but our object is not to collect all the anthropomorphisms of the Talmud, but rather to attempt an explanation of their existence there. Sufficient instances have been given to illustrate the two dissimilar conceptions of God presented in the Talmudic literature. We have given them in what appears to us the order of the origin, viz., first the refined and abstract conception, then the Judaized form, and lastly the more generally human representation. We believe there were good reasons why the Judaized conception should arise ; and this having arisen, a precedent was thereby set for extending the "humanity" of God into details not specially Jewish.

In attempting to account for the phenomena, of which the facts are now before the reader, we shall notice two explanations which have been offered. The first is that of Hirschfeld, and is contained in his work *Die Haggadische Exegese*, p. 100, onwards. We translate a few sentences which contain his views upon the subject. "Definitely pronounced *dicta* from the doctrines of philosophers, as well as from the belief of

the common life of the people, had penetrated the (Pharisaic) circle of ideas, and were freely welcomed as soon as they found adequate foundation in the Bible, or as soon as they proved acceptable and appeared to be indicated in Scripture. Thus we find even gross, heathen, popular belief about the gods transferred to the God who is revealed to man in Scripture, because they were disseminated by authority." Then follow various instances of anthropomorphisms, such as those already mentioned ; after which the author proceeds (p. 102): "All these views, which were taken over into Judaism from the coarse, sensuous heathenism, and to which graphic Oriental speech could offer at most analogies, arose from the lack of scientific culture, and from the dependence on authority in regard to belief which characterized the distant provinces at that time. Political and social conditions, the dreary pressure of circumstances, put a natural restraint upon higher thoughts, and forced the mind down to sensuous conceptions. The mind could not so far raise itself as to look above and beyond the prejudices of the people, and it emancipated popular forms of belief by canonizing the religious ideas of the masses." Finally (p. 106), at the end of the section on Pharisaism, he concludes, "In all sorts of ways the most various ideas were drawn into the circle of belief, which was thereby modified ; but, nevertheless, the kernel remained unaltered, and while it drew to itself foreign notions, prevailed over their oppositeness and assimilated them."

Intercourse with Gentiles, political and social adversity and consequent depression of spirits, these are the causes to which Hirschfeld ascribes the anthropomorphic features of the Talmudic doctrine of God. But is this explanation probable ? Is it likely that foreign philosophies should have affected Rabbinical thought, at a time too when the lines of demarcation between Jew and Gentile were being more and more strictly drawn ? Surely, one great object of the Talmud was to define the true Israelite, to distinguish his religious, moral and social position, from that of all Gentiles and unbelievers. And if this be so, it is hard to understand how Gentile doctrines and superstitions could find an easy entrance into the circle of Pharisaic thought. This difficulty still remains, even if we admit that it was not the primary concern of the Talmud to lay down a doctrine of God, but rather to sketch the "whole duty of man." For still the fundamental idea of the Talmud was a religious one, and the intermingling of Gentile elements in its theology could hardly be a matter of indifference to its authors. It is true there is in the Talmud a most

miscellaneous variety of subjects ; the manners and customs of many nations are incidentally mentioned, and furnish abundant proof of intercourse between Jews and Gentiles. But it does not follow that this intercourse led to adoption by the Jews of Gentile belief and doctrines. The Talmud is a creation, not a mere compilation ; its authors were not concerned to pick-and-choose what they approved in the religions of neighbouring peoples ; they were concerned to develop a principle of their own, and did develop it with marvellous patience and ingenuity, needing no help from the Gentile world.

Besides the adoption of Gentile notions, Hirschfeld alleges as a second cause of the anthropomorphic representation of God in the Talmud, the social and political conditions of the times during which the Mishnah and Gemara grew up. The Jews suffered persecution at the hands of the Romans, at all events during a part of this period, and though they made heroic struggles to retain their political existence during the reigns of Vespasian and Hadrian, they were finally overcome, and the fall of Bethar was the death-blow of the Jewish State. From that time onward the children of Israel have been a scattered and homeless people, and if political calamity has any effect on the mental tone of a people, if it " puts a natural limit on aspiration, and forces the mind down to merely sensuous and material religious thoughts," as Hirschfeld maintains, then certainly we should expect to find abundant traces of this mental degradation in the Talmud. But it seems to us that the case is very different from what Hirschfeld describes. Persecution usually has the effect, not of deadening enthusiasm and lowering the tone of religious and moral thought, but of stimulating and inspiring it. In the early days, before the Romans had finally conquered, religious zeal flamed out strong and bright under the stress of persecution ; and the two men who did more than almost all else for the future of Jewish religion were Jochanan ben Zaccai in the war with Titus, and Aqiba in the death-struggle under Bar-Cocheba. To say of these men, and especially of Aqiba, that they were men of low and degraded religious natures is simply to libel them. We might, with more reason, expect to find traces of this mental degradation in the long centuries after the war of Hadrian, during which the Jews never recovered their political status, and when " hope deferred " only too often " made their heart sick." But even then, the unflinching determination with which the great leaders and " masters in Israel " clung to their religion, and worked out its principles into ever minuter details, shows plainly how unspeakably

precious it was to them, and, as we think, forbids us to assert that they sunk to coarse and materialistic religious ideas. Doubtless their religion assumed a very peculiar form; but where there was so much vitality in it, as there certainly was at least in the case of the great Rabbis of the Talmud, it is hard to believe that a religion which grew and made way against such difficulties should be merely a degraded and materialistic belief. We are, therefore, unable to accept Hirschfeld's explanation as an adequate solution of the problem contained in the Talmudic doctrine of God.

Weber, in his book already referred to, *System der Alt-Synagogalen Palästinischen Theologie*, offers a different explanation, and one which seems to be much more satisfactory. He says (p. 153), "The decisiveness with which Legalism (der Nomismus) had asserted the Law to be the absolute revelation of God, both beyond and in time, had this result, that the idea of God was subsequently determined by the principle of Nomocracy, and God was conceived as the God of the Torah; the idea of God was thereby Judaized—a reaction against Transcendentalism, which did not lead any nearer to the goal of truth." The statements made about God thus conceived of, are not, as he says (p. 146), mere absurdities, still less blasphemies, as they were formerly designated. They are the necessary consequences of the nomistic conception of revelation. "How else," he asks, "could the former purely abstract idea of God be filled with life? Of necessity the Torah must appear as the reflex of the inner life of God, Heaven must take the form of a realm of Torah, and God must be Judaized. The older conception is certainly incompatible with this, and thus the result of Legalism upon the Jewish idea of God is a harsh dualism." This explanation appears to meet the case far more completely than that of Hirschfeld; but yet we cannot feel quite satisfied with it. It certainly does account for the anthropomorphic conception of God in the Talmud in a far more probable and reasonable manner than by the suggestion of accretions from Gentile thought, or the depressing effects of hardship and suffering. We admit with Weber the logical necessity according to which the Legal conception of religion developed the belief in God as the God of the Torah. But we think that his interpretation of this belief does not quite do justice to the religious position of those who held it. It is true that Weber protests against the notion that the anthropomorphic statements in the Talmud are absurdities, or actual blasphemies; but yet he seems to treat them as expressions of a much lower idea of God than the older one, and maintains that there is a

harsh dualism in Talmudic Theology. A dualism there certainly is, if no more than the verbal expression be considered, but it may be doubted whether it extends deeper. Is it not rather that such statements as those about God studying the Torah have no meaning apart from the belief in him as the infinite and eternal God? That the one doctrine, not merely logically followed from the other, but was always held in connection with it, in the minds of the Talmudic theologians? The anthropomorphisms seem to me to be rather a species of cypher or symbolic language, liable indeed to be misused and misunderstood, but employed by those who were masters of it solely to denote great truths of their religion. This applies to those expressions which connect God with the Torah; those which have no such reference we take to be simply extensions of the anthropomorphic principle into regions where it has properly no meaning.

Granted that the Torah, both written and oral, was looked upon as the sole and perfect revelation of God, then there is no absurdity in saying that God concerns himself with or studies it. If he studies it, his angels may do so too, hence the Beth-hammidrash of heaven. And if the sum total of divine knowledge and wisdom have been revealed in the Torah, which is committed to his people on earth, then the assertion that a mortal should decide in the controversies of heaven loses most of its apparent impiety. It is, of course, almost, if not quite, impossible for us of modern days to think ourselves back into the mental position of the authors of the Talmud, but yet it seems possible that such peculiar modes of representing the nature and the action of God should go hand in hand with real reverence and piety towards him. To take one of these startling statements and expound it as allegory, when to all appearance it is intended literally, may seem unwarrantable and unsupported by any evidence in the passage itself. We admit this, and give as our chief ground for the view we take, the fact that, judged by its results, the religion which inspired the Talmud was a strong and living faith; and such a faith we hold to stand in no need of either accretions from without, according to Hirschfeld, or forced interpretations intended to give life and colour to an abstract idea, as Weber maintains, and in such a faith there seems to be little room for a "harsh dualism." Of course this applies to the religion of the Talmud, as shown in the most distinguished of the men who made it. Amongst the host of Rabbis whose words are enshrined in its pages are men of very different gifts, very different mental range. Many no doubt there were who did not feel the religious importance of

the task they were engaged in, who were merely pedants of the schools. And by these, very probably, the statements about God were understood in a degraded and literal sense. But when it is borne in mind how the Talmud is the result of centuries of patient work, how the study of Torah was the absorbing task of men like Hillel, Jochanan ben Zaccai, Aqiba Meir, Rab, Abahu, and many others, all of them men of great ability, then it is plain that religion, no matter how strange to modern ideas be the form in which they held it, was a real power in the souls of those who made the Talmud. The form, doubtless, was that of tradition and Legalism, but religion had not lost connection with its living springs in the soul, and thus it could renew itself and enter upon fresh developments, according to the changing needs of the time. The rise of Christianity, instead of being fatal to Judaism, gave it new life; all the latent energy of the old religion was roused to combat the opposition of the new; and even when the loss of the Temple, and later still, the political extinction of the nation, added crushing weight to the blows which had already fallen, still Israel stood firm, and clung to what God had given her to defend. Her sons lived for the Torah, and when that was no longer possible, they died for it. Faithfully each generation of teachers and scholars spent their strength, in face of danger and in spite of scorn, upon the task appointed for them; and to say that the power which inspired them was nothing more than a tradition from ancient days seems to me to fall far short of what truth and justice alike demand. Without this foundation of strong and living religion, the Talmud is inexplicable, for without it there is nothing to show why the best strength of Israel's greatest minds during nearly a thousand years, more or less, should be devoted to such solemn trifling as the Talmud, superficially considered, appears to be. Assuming, then, that the religion which lay at the foundation of the Talmud was strong and real, we maintain that the anthropomorphisms which logically result from the legal principle, are to be understood and interpreted, not literally, but in the light of the more spiritual conception of God, with which they are apparently at variance. Such, we believe, to have been the interpretation of those who framed these peculiar and startling statements of doctrine.

The above explanation applies, as had been said, only to those expressions which directly or indirectly associate God with the Torah. We should account for the others, which are not specially Jewish in form, by saying that the precedent having once been set, of using anthropomorphic language in speaking of God, such language came to be used in cases where it was

really unmeaning. It could only be on the strength of such a precedent that such interpretations of texts could be adopted as those which say that God plays with the Leviathan, that he wears a Tallith, etc. (In the case of the first of these, it is probable that the Talmudic interpretation of Ps. civ. 26 is in accordance with the Psalmist's meaning; but, considering the lapse of time between the Psalmist and his Rabbinical interpreter, the adoption by the latter of the anthropomorphic explanation certainly calls for notice.) In expressions of this kind a hidden religious meaning is not to be sought for, at least it is hard to see what edifying truth is concealed in the statement that the Almighty and his angels shaved Sennacherib. But, nevertheless, it would be unjust to found upon these and similar expressions a charge of profanity against the authors of the Talmud; for amidst and beneath all its display of mingled wit and wisdom, fanciful imagination and close reasoning, there is a deep under-current of grave and solemn earnestness of resolute purpose, and of unassailible loyalty to religion. And although many isolated details of the Talmud may awaken surprise or aversion, yet it is only fair to consider them and judge them in connection with the entire mighty fabric to which they belong. It is our conviction that as the heroes of Israel, in Talmudic times, did well for their countrymen, so also they cherished a high and inspiring belief in God.

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